

PlanBTVSEcomments

082915

I. Good

Much of what I will write about is critical so I would like to take a moment to share what I think is good about PlanBTV South End (hereafter the Plan).

The fact that the City has made the "South End" a focus, especially with regard to means to protect the arts district, is very much appreciated. With this focus, a major discussion has been initiated -- with or without the consultants. Their suggestions that various specific questions be pursued by City organizations is also useful, and provides the framework with which to carry the suggestions in the Plan forward on the local level. The Plan has nicely summarized all of the issues facing the "South End" and many, even if implicitly (the consultants were paid to look at the South End, and especially that part of it known as the Enterprise Zone) facing Burlington on a broader scale.

Even if often drawn from other cities, the illustrations provide an unique way to begin to visualize what could be done to create a vision for a vibrant community. Many of the suggestions around the arts district and green space are ideas shared by most people in Burlington. When seen through the light of these illustrations, and when you walk around the Enterprise Zone, you can easily see the huge disjuncture between what is on the ground and what the area could be. In that way, the visions of the Plan create a mindset that pursues these visions and puts the onus on their success squarely on City officials. The stakes are high for the decision makers if they will allow Burlington to become the city it could become.

On the other hand, a first quick look at the Plan shows an overuse of graphics that may or may not make any sense. If used in connection with a vision (as in a bike path or a green street), they work. When used to illustrate a point (as in the word cloud illustrations or the various quotes, eg p 29-31), they fall short, and this is part of the main critical points I want to make about the Plan: a sloppiness in covering vital analysis.

II. Critique

One thing that seems to be missing is the conflation of "South End" with the Enterprise Zone. The Plan focuses on the Enterprise Zone (it states so itself p 17, but treats the Enterprise Zone as the "South End" which causes enormous confusion). The Enterprise Zone is the only area in the City that is zoned to exclude housing -- thus, since housing is both lucrative and has been presented as a major "crisis," the Enterprise Zone becomes an easy target for rezoning to allow housing. Housing sets the parameters by the City and the consultants are paid to pursue them.

The main critique of the Plan is its distortion of data that is central to what the Enterprise Zone is about or not about. The Plan gives no real alternative solutions to this crisis and the suggestions of putting housing into the Enterprise is nowhere addressed either in

terms of whether busting the Zone for housing would actually solve the housing crisis or the effects that housing would have on the Zone.

As a result of this hidden intent, what is provided in the Plan in certain areas comes out sloppy; the fact that the rest of the Plan has issues that are generally agreed on (green streets, arts district, green spaces, bike paths) notwithstanding. It makes the Plan come out as a mere cover for a housing agenda.

The HRandA South End Market Study is one of the studies on which the Plan is based. Some of the most useful suggestions made by HRandA are ignored in PlanBTV South End. HRandA note that Burlington has about 1.3 million square feet of industrial inventory -- "90% of which is located in the South End. Thus the South End serves as the center of Burlington's industrial economy." (HRandA SE Market Study p 35). HRandA also "link creation of new housing to broader economic development goals of job creation and innovation" (HRandA SE Market Study p 52); the failure of Portland OR's Pearl District was in part due to allowing residential and office development. Portland's Central Eastside was an attempt to avoid this problem, but we know to date that housing has made its inroad even there and gentrification has begun in earnest. Although comparisons like these are useful, they should not be used to promote a cookie cutter type of planning, but instead provide analytical grist for better in-depth study of the effect of housing on the Enterprise Zone which the Plan does not do. In fact, the HRandA study makes it clear that if housing is allowed in the Enterprise Zone, it could "lose well-paying jobs and economic diversity" (HRandA p. 76).

Public participation is a real challenge to any planning process. PlanBTV South End makes some overly optimistic claims about the real role public participation has played. For those who were part of that, it leaves a sour taste. For example, the Plan claims that it "represents the ideas, aspirations, and concerns of hundreds of community members who participated in the process" (p 6). This may be true but not as part of what the officials and consultants have done but what the response has been that has been carried on by the community. So, the section "Taking it to the people" (p 7 - 9) needs to be read with a grain of salt. "Focus group meetings..." etc as listed on p 8 have been less a part of the Plan's own process as much as what people in the community have done partially in response to the shortcomings of the Plan's process. The claim that the NPA's were part of the outreach is a stretch. It was hopeful thinking on the part of the officials who set up the events. The section on the "artist-led outreach" was BCA working on cues from consultants and fell far short of real artist involvement. This is a whole area of its own that has been manipulated in the Plan in a way that has just led to more mistrust.

Similarly, the section "South Enders Speak" (p 28-29) gives the appearance of an in-depth public participation in the Plan when in fact, there was not that great a turnout at the Plan sponsored events (there were larger turnouts at events pushed by the artist community); again, the bubbles and clouds that the Plan uses to represent "public participation" (see p 30 and 31) are shallow and misleading.

This analytical shallowness leads to some of the controversial statements made in the Plan about housing. Keep in mind the conflation between “South End” and the Enterprise Zone.

The statement “There is strong demand for housing in the South End to accommodate a growing workforce, but development economics and land use regulations (zoning) are barriers to addressing this housing need” (p 38) pretty much makes a lot of the good things said in the Plan irrelevant. There is a “strong demand for housing in the South End” is one thing. There is also a strong demand in the North End, the University zone, Winooski, Williston, South Burlington, Shelburne, and Essex where housing is not zoned out. The Plan is obviously designed to convince people to bust the Enterprise Zone for housing. This is important, and if the statements made in the Plan continue to be grist for the overall PlanBTV development mill, they are based on manipulated data, on false data or even on lack of supporting and relevant data.

For example, manipulated data: where the Enterprise Zone is discussed in terms of what it does (p 17), in the same breath the Plan makes a special point that there is a very small amount of housing in the Enterprise Zone. The area is zoned to keep housing out, that is the whole idea, and not, as implied, that since there is little housing there that there needs to be more.

Another example of sloppy manipulation of data: “There is a considerable unmet demand for housing citywide -- and a resulting affordability crisis” (p 23). Citywide means in Burlington. In fact, they even state on the same page that “most new housing that has been built is located outside the city of Burlington” -- as if that were miles away. Remember, the towns of Winooski and South Burlington border on Burlington (the South Burlington border is about half a mile from the Enterprise Zone (about 850 yards, easy walking distance) and the K-Mart lot/Hannaford area (with the potential of thousands of housing units) another 300 yards. Other towns are a 10-15 minute drive away. So the implications of the Plan are that, since housing is not allowed in the Enterprise Zone and since there seems to be no other way to solve the crisis as long as we focus on Burlington itself, that we need again to bust the Enterprise Zone for housing; or, conversely, there is considerable unmet demand for housing in Burlington, therefore solve the problem by building in the Enterprise Zone. Or, better yet, is there something wrong with the fact that most new housing is built in the towns that are max 15-20 minute drives from downtown Burlington? Are the consultants paid to perpetuate some kind of turf war?

Admittedly, the Plan relies on data collected by others, and rests on the weakness of that data leading to the use of false data. However, this should have been made clear in the Plan and the data treated accordingly. For example, in spite of some solid foundational suggestions, the HRandA South End market study equates “young professionals” with everyone in the age group 25-34 (HRandA SE Market Study p 22-24), which distorts any understanding of what the “real young professional” category really needs and wants. This is repeated in the Plan, and an unquestioning assumption of false data is unprofessional.

The fact that the South End is a desirable neighborhood to live in and near and that there is a considerable unmet demand for housing does not translate into the fact that these people are seeking housing in the Enterprise Zone. In addition to the manipulated data mentioned earlier, of particular concern here are the conclusions based on housing surveys. These surveys are mentioned in the Plan as if they were proof that there is a demand for housing in the Enterprise Zone. But, looking at the original surveys, there is nothing that states that affordability of art studios, for example, needs to be connected to affordability of housing (they can be separate issues), although the questions seem to be set up to do this. This hoodwinking is compounded by the lack of clarity in distinguishing studio and built live/work housing in all of the questions relating to housing only. For example, Question 33 in the BCA survey asks which factors are important in looking for a new home, etc., and people will answer that accordingly, as would anyone since everyone needs housing. Note questions 2 and 3 which ask if you are living in Burlington and if not would be interested in living in the South End (yes, 60.28% from 151 of 214 respondents), a question that once again does not ask if any of these people would like to live in housing in the Enterprise Zone.

Some survey questions are senseless such as 26: would you live in a 3 or 4 story building with an elevator etc. if it was built (you can answer yes or no to this irrespective of the question of where it would be located since the question is not tied to the question of where), is the same senseless question that the consultants use as an example in the Plan (p 59). For these and similar reasons, the South End Employee survey is inconclusive in that regard and should not be used to push housing in the Enterprise Zone.

Although it is interesting to know how and where artists live and what they would like to live in, there is nothing in the housing questions that imply that the solution to any issue is to build housing in the Enterprise Zone.

There is nothing in this survey that supports building any kind of housing in the South End Enterprise Zone.

This survey is used in the Plan, for example, on p 59. None of the so-called analyses stipulate that anyone is seeking housing in the Enterprise Zone (when asked on or near Pine St it could be beyond Home Ave or from Pearl to Maple). And, with a close look at page 59, what the consultants are saying here is actually just the opposite of what they are intending. Artist Survey: yes 117, no or NA 97 (too close to have an statistical validity especially since the question is unclear), and Worker Survey yes 74 and no or NA 140 which is probably better stats and proves Goody Clancy wrong.

This lack of conclusive data from the original surveys is not necessarily the consultants fault. But if they were trying to make a case, they would have needed to check the data. The fact that they did not implies that they did not care about the data as much as making up a glossy, cute presentation to make it look like it was just a little divisive (see page 57: "Some South Enders voiced concerns" is an incompetent interpretation and

distortion of the data) rather than almost totally in favor (as the online web survey indicated, which the consultants brushed aside) of no housing in the Enterprise Zone.

PlanBTV South End is a cookie cutter plan and lacks supporting and relevant data. Snippets are taken from here and there within the realm of what other areas the consultants have worked in or looked at. Rather than focus on Burlington and its unique South End Enterprise Zone, comparisons are made with other areas and cookie cutter suggestions are made. It is not like bigger cities which may have several such areas. The Plan does not look deeply into what has happened in these other areas (Milwaukee, Somerville, MA, etc) in a way that is an in-depth comparison with Burlington. We have been admonished by one place (Cleveland) that since we have only one Enterprise Zone to protect it from the encroachment of housing or it will be killed. No analysis of this sort is provided in the Plan. In fact, the Plan casually states (p 57) that although the community “is divided on the topic of housing” (the understatement of the year in consultant claims, like in the misleading adjacent gray sidebars on that page), “with the right policies and controls...it is possible” to push some kind of housing in the Enterprise Zone. Thus they go on to explain what that would be: workplace housing, mixed use with retails, and the elusive idea of work/live space for artists. In short, the consultants seems to have been hired to find a way to let the busting of the Enterprise Zone begin through what would inevitably become encroaching housing.

Very few believe that the housing that would be built in the Enterprise Zone will be maintained as worker/artist housing, much less “affordable” -- so near to the lake front and downtown.

Where is the suggestion to push for better regional planning? Where does mass transit come in to help solve problems? All we hear about this is better bus schedules and bus stops which are suggestions anyone could have come up with and the constructive suggestion to build a transit-oriented park and ride goes by the wayside (p 48) since it would involve a regional approach which the consultants are not paid to do.

The same cookie cutter approach is apparent in how the consultants write off both the manufacturing that is going on in the Enterprise Zone as well as what its future could be. The implication is that what Burlington needs is less manufacturing (out with the old) and more high-tech jobs (in with the new -- and the money to pay for the gentrification of the South End). Blodgett Ovens is written off as early as page 11: “Like many manufacturing buildings in the South End, it will soon see reuse” is about as insulting to working class people as anything written by any yuppie. Note also where Blodgett is located: a dream come true for a housing developer (we are aware of how the push for housing is driven to a large part by financial gain and not community-led envisioning).

There is nothing in the Plan which analyzes just exactly what could be done in the Enterprise Zone that would empower it to do what it already does best, especially in connection with the combination of small craft businesses and micro-manufacturing, innovation creation space, incubator sites, maker-spaces in both the high-tech sense and in the micro-manufacturing sense. Nothing in the Plan that allows anyone to take a

look at what the Enterprise Zone could do for Burlington's (and the nation's -- in the sense of the return of manufacturing) economy and sustainability. In fact, "sustainability" is a word hardly (if ever) used in the Plan. Instead we read about growth in the "new economy" sector (p 38) without much in-depth analysis of how that could be made to help empower the Enterprise Zone. Instead, we read the last sentence in that column that there is a "strong demand for housing in the South End" which basically both invalidates their effort to develop any sensible discussion of manufacturing as well as throw housing in your face almost like a bludgeon.

Similarly, there is a lack of relevant data applied to the implications of the Champlain parkway. All we read is that it is not "your mother's southern connector" (p 49) which is senseless. Likewise it is declared a "multimodal project" which, by the definition they use, pertains to all of the streets in Burlington -- some connecting rail and bus are even more multimodal. Very little is approached in a way that sees the parkway as anything other than a way to shuttle in cars faster into the downtown. Nothing critical or constructive is said of it and most of the parkway discussion is a rehash of what is already known about it (pp 44 - 48), and little attempt is made to suggest ways to divert traffic (including truck) back into the Enterprise Zone. This would seem to be a basic for any consultant dealing with the South End.

If the consultants had built on a better foundation laid by what they say on page 28 and not delve into feeble ways to rationalize housing in the Enterprise Zone through a weak community process, much of what they say which is good would have come across better.